

1-1-2007

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B.J. Mpofu

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### Recommended Citation

Mpofu, B. J. (2007) "What it Means to be the Church in Zimbabwe," *Leaven*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 12.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol15/iss1/12>

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# What It Means To Be The Church in Zimbabwe

B.J. MPOFU

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**Z**imbabwe is a landlocked country in Southern Africa that boasts some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. The famous Victoria Falls forms the northern boundary with Zambia, with the Zimbabwe Ruins in the Southeast, and the Eastern Highlands in the northern part of the country. Zimbabwe is rich with mineral resources and fertile lands for growing crops. We are affected by periodic droughts, but this year God has blessed us with plentiful rain, and we pray now for bountiful harvests.

The Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe were first started by missionaries from New Zealand in 1896, and have taken an active part in evangelizing and developing the country in all areas of life. We have over a thousand proto-churches in the country, spanning every city and the rural areas of our land. The church has been an active participant in ensuring that we do not just preach the Word but are “doers” of the Word. We are involved in running schools and hospitals in the outlying areas of the country—thanks to overseas missions from the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Although most missionaries have gone home and left the work in indigenous hands, the work has continued to flourish due to the missionaries’ excellent training. Our hospitals are now staffed by doctors who trained in the U.S. These doctors have taken over leadership responsibilities at the missions, yet are still well supported by U.S. churches. Our high schools are less dependent on missions, but are run on a cost recovery basis from the fees levied on the parents of the students. The momentum has continued with a new desire on the part of the indigenous populace to expand the work of the missionaries. In my own regional grouping of churches we have opened up more than eighty new proto-churches in the last three years. Because of the prevailing social environment, we have seen an upsurge in the growth of the church.

The problems facing our country have created fertile ground for the extension of God’s work. The church has taken advantage of this thirst for his word and is busy evangelizing our population. The churches are full! Our main impediment is lack of resources. One of the most exciting things happening is the local churches’ desire to be self-reliant; the concept of supporting the church through tithing has taken grip on the churches in Zimbabwe. Not just the Churches of Christ, but also the entire missionary church, have taken to tithing as a way toward self-reliance. We will continue to need overseas support for decades, but the exciting thing is that we can see a day in twenty to thirty years’ time when the local church will say, “Thank you, our overseas partners, for we can now stand side by side with you and take on the challenges of the Great Commission!”

The great news about the church in Zimbabwe is that the divisions in the churches in America have not had an impact on our local people. We are also grateful to missionaries who have come into our country, for they seem to leave their differences in the States and co-exist here very well. Most African people will attend the Christian Church (instrumental) or Church of Christ (non-instrumental) without seeing any differences—they simply go to the nearest church. (Actually, because of poverty, the African church cannot afford instruments, so even in an instrumental church we are non-instrumental!) And that helps us not to see



the differences, but to enjoy worshipping in a diversified way. The church continues to grow by leaps and bounds! And God continues to be glorified in our otherwise troubled land!

In Zimbabwe, the church today carries a host of responsibilities that the church in the past did not worry about. The political situation in our country is such that the issues of governance, civil rights, and justice appear to be questionable. The church now finds itself having to fight on behalf of the ordinary man, for he is helpless to fight for himself. Through the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Evangelical Fellowship, the church has partnered with other non-governmental organizations to put pressure on the government to accept the concept of a new Constitution that would guarantee people's rights and other freedoms that are currently being violated. The church has continued to put pressure on the government to raise awareness of injustices perpetrated by government agencies in the country. The church has become the voice of the voiceless and has taken on the responsibility of speaking the loudest on behalf of the populace.

The recent drought and other disturbances on the land have created another dilemma. The church has been raising money overseas for food relief, and has been fighting government bureaucracy and the politicization of food to see that everyone receives food, regardless of political affiliation. This is not an easy hurdle to overcome, as the governing party controls the structures in the rural areas, people are threatened and the red tape is stretched tight. It takes courage on the churches' part to say "No!" to the pressure exerted by the ruling party and its desire to control and divide the populace as a weapon for support.

The church has also had to act as custodian of the type of bills that go through Parliament. The church makes it a point to shout loudest when an oppressive bill is about to be passed. The church has become the protector of the population against unjust legislation. A typical example was when the Non-Governmental Organization Bill went through all the stages of Parliament and was awaiting the president's signature. The church wrote to the president and told him that if he signed the Bill into law the church was going to defy the law, for the Bill would stop the church from doing its core business (the Bill was not going to allow the church to distribute food, and yet the Bible says the church must feed the hungry!). Happily, the president did not sign the Bill into law. To this day no mention has been made of that Bill!

The church has also had to take on the responsibility of dealing with the AIDS pandemic, which has affected all facets of our society. The church is in the front line of the fight against this disease. Every church today has its AIDS educators, who teach the people about the scourge of AIDS. A number of churches, including ours, have established AIDS orphanages like Khaylihle Children's Village. In homes like this we care for children after both parents have died, or if a remaining parent is too frail to look after the child. A big portion of this work takes place through the home-based care program, in which we care for the needs of orphans that are left either with relatives or in "child families" (families run by children of school age). The orphans need money for rent, food, school fees, books, and water. We thank our overseas partners for their support in this area; when it comes to AIDS, Zimbabwe's needs are bottomless.

The other ministry the church is seriously addressing is that of overdependence on missions. One of the biggest failures of early mission work was the failure to teach people to be self-reliant. The church in our country has always relied on support to such an extent that people here enjoyed receiving rather than giving. The church in Zimbabwe has now taken upon itself to ensure that it gives enough for the church to be self-reliant and to respond to the Great Commission in a more meaningful manner. We have discovered that for the church to be able to stand on its own, there is no substitute to tithing, and this is one gospel we are spreading like wildfire. We have also discovered, however, that one can only give if one has something to give! The need, therefore, to empower our people has become paramount, particularly in the rural areas.

A year ago, assisted by a board of six people, I started the Showers of Blessings Trust. In areas where we have churches, our desire is to drill boreholes to provide easy access to clean water for domestic use and for watering livestock and vegetables. Although a step forward, this unfortunately will provide relief only on a subsistence level. We are busy conducting a study on how to transform people's lives in the rural

areas by bringing them into the cash economy. We see ourselves moving into areas such as cattle feeding and pig rearing, as well as educating the local populace on ways to transform their wealth into money. Once empowered and brought into the cash economy, we see the spillover coming to the church through tithes and offerings.

As can be seen, the character and personality of the church in Zimbabwe today has completely changed from the old mission days when the main themes were evangelism and building churches. We are excited that our Movement is playing a critical role in responding to the Holy Spirit as he directs his message in our land.

**B. J. MPOFU** IS OUTGOING PRESIDENT OF ASSOCIATE CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN ZIMBABWE.

